



Building bridges to opportunity

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Applying to college can be daunting, especially if you're the first in your family to pursue third-level education. [The Bridges Project](#), a nonprofit based in Taos, has been helping with this challenge for the last twenty years.

They provide free, individualized college counseling and support programs for students of all ages, helping with applications and financial aid, and guiding them in making informed choices about the best college for their needs. Bridges receives support from Laboratory employees and Laboratory operator Los Alamos National Security, LLC through contributions to the Lab's Employee Giving Campaign.

"College access is a community issue, and inequality hurts us all," says Joleen Montoya Dye, Bridges' executive director. "We help level the playing field by demystifying the process, identifying resources, sharing information, and helping students find their way forward in education and life."

Montoya Dye points out that an increasing number of jobs will require a career certificate or college degree, and while 95% of area sophomores surveyed believed that college could help them with their career and life goals, many had little understanding of how to get there.

Individual support

To help rectify that, Bridges' key service is individualized counseling, helping students identify goals and stay on track as they gather application materials and meet deadlines. For first generation students, the help from Bridges is particularly important and Bridges supports both students and parents as they learn to navigate the system.

Laboratory civil engineer Santana Rael knows first-hand the help that Bridges can offer. She was still in high school when her son was born and when she approached Bridges for help, she wasn't sure how her plans for college would work out.

"Working with Bridges was amazing," Santana says. When writing admission essays, for example, she had been reluctant to share personal information for fear of being stereotyped and judged.

With Bridges' advice, Santana saw that owning her own story - recognizing the strength and determination she showed to eventually graduate salutatorian of her class from Questa High School while caring for her infant son - helped her understand herself better and make a strong case for college admission.

Her counselor's support helped Santana gain admission to the University of New Mexico and receive scholarships from the Los Alamos Employees Scholarship Fund. An internship at the Laboratory ultimately led to her job there.

Santana has kept in touch with Bridges, and recently helped them with their 20th anniversary crowdfunding campaign.

Spreading the word

Bridges works individually with over 100 students each year, but it also reaches out more widely with the community, planting the idea of college in students' minds before the last two years of high school, and backing that up with solid information.

Bridges presents college application overviews to all high schools in the Taos area, writes a monthly column in the Taos News and has built out a rich set of resources for students, parents, educators and the wider community on [its website](#).

A new curriculum known as College Connections supports students from eighth grade through to their senior year, helping them identify their strengths and goals early on, and understand what it will take to reach their targets.

Research confirms that disparities in college access disproportionately affect minority, lower-income and first-generation students, but the work of Bridges and its other partners in the area is showing results.

In 2007 there were four white non-Hispanic people with bachelor's degrees in the Taos area for every one degree holder of Hispanic ethnicity. By 2014, that ratio had improved to three to one.

Behind these statistics are hundreds of students with increased access to opportunity and an economic boost to Northern New Mexico.

"It is imperative for every person to have information about various post-secondary options and the road map to get there," says Montoya Dye. "We do not believe that going to college or receiving vocational training is the only way to build a successful life, but we want to ensure that people make this choice actively and that it is not made for them because of insufficient information or support."

Los Alamos National Laboratory

www.lanl.gov

(505) 667-7000

Los Alamos, NM

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